

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 136NATION
31 August 1985

DISPATCHES.

■ WASHINGTON: Claire Sterling & the C.I.A.

With the antics of Mehmet Ali Agca at his trial in Rome for the attempted assassination of the Pope, even the mainstream press has become skeptical about his alleged links to the K.G.B., first reported by Claire Sterling.

Last week "Dispatches" obtained from an anonymous source an unsolicited clue as to Sterling's sources and methods: a plain brown envelope containing copies of correspondence between Sterling and her Washington lawyer, Ronald Plesser, which discussed a deal struck between the journalist and the C.I.A. Although Plesser won't talk and Sterling did not reply to our repeated efforts to contact her for comment, enough of the story can be pieced together from the public record and the correspondence to suggest that Sterling's journalistic sources and methods are suspect, to say the least.

After her controversial book *The Terror Network* was published in 1981, a number of libel suits were brought in Europe. Worried, Sterling filed a slew of Freedom of Information Act requests in 1982 with the C.I.A. and other U.S. agencies for documents about one Henri Curiel and his associates. The centerpiece of her book had been the allegation that Curiel, a radical French intellectual, masterminded an international network of terrorists doing the K.G.B.'s dirty work. The sole piece of documentary evidence for this contention was a public report released by the C.I.A. in 1979 which said that Curiel had led a Paris-based group that "funneled money, arms, documents, training, and other services to scores of leftist groups."

Responsible journalistic practice would have been to file the requests prior to publication, and if the agency refused to divulge its sources of the information, to say so in the book. Sterling had presented the agency's undocumented assertions as proof. Then, in March 1983, she dropped her F.O.I.A. requests. In return, she obtained an affidavit from the C.I.A.'s chief of public affairs, Charles E. Wilson, stating, "Information available to the Central Intelligence Agency as of March, 1979, indicated that Henri Curiel headed an apparatus that provided technical support to groups that engaged in terrorist acts." Sterling also agreed that the affidavit would remain secret unless she needed it in court.

When asked to comment, Wilson at first couldn't recall signing the affidavit. "I would have thought I'd remember something like this," he said. "It is curious. . . . Claire Sterling is one of those conspiratorialists about international terrorism; that certainly isn't our view, though I must admit I liked her theory about the K.G.B. and the Pope. That had the hair on the backs of the K.G.B. fellows standing on end." After checking his files, Wilson acknowledged he had signed the affidavit. He suggested that the agency had agreed to this unusual procedure for two reasons: first, because the agency tries to cut down the workload of its F.O.I.A. staff whenever possible; and second, because Sterling was willing to settle for a reiteration (without citing sources) of an agency opinion that was already in the public

record. The C.I.A. had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Sterling, however, lost one of the suits, and a corrected French edition of her book was published.